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Arab states expanded cooperation with Israeli military during Gaza war, files show

Israeli and Arab military officials have come together for meetings and trainings, facilitated by U.S. Central Command, on regional threats, Iran and underground tunnels.

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Gen. Dan Caine, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, at a news conference at the Pentagon following the U.S. strikes on Iran in June. (Andrew Harnik/Getty Images)

By David Kenner

Even as key Arab states condemned the war in the Gaza Strip, they quietly expanded security cooperation with the Israeli military, leaked U.S. documents reveal. Those military ties were thrown into crisis after Israel's September airstrike in Qatar, but could now play a key role in overseeing the nascent ceasefire in Gaza.

Over the past three years, facilitated by the United States, senior military officials from Israel and six Arab countries came together for planning meetings in Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan and Qatar.

Israel and Hamas agreed on Wednesday to the first phase of a peace framework that would result in the release of all the hostages held by Hamas and a partial Israeli withdrawal from Gaza. U.S. officials announced on Thursday that 200 U.S. troops would be sent to Israel to provide support to the ceasefire agreement and would be joined by soldiers from several of the Arab countries that participated in this long-standing security cooperation.

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Even before that announcement, the Arab countries involved in this security collaboration had signaled their support for President Donald Trump's 20-point plan to end the Gaza war. The plan calls for Arab states to participate in the deployment of an international force to Gaza

that would train a new Palestinian police force in the region.

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In a joint statement, five of the six Arab countries said that they supported the establishment of a mechanism that "guarantees the security of all sides," but they have stopped short of publicly committing to deploy military forces.

Qatar, whose capital was struck on Sept. 9 by Israeli missiles targeting Hamas leaders, was one of the countries that had quietly strengthened ties with the Israeli military. In May 2024, the documents show, senior Israeli and Arab military officials convened at al-Udeid Air Base, a major U.S. military facility in Qatar. A planning document for the event, written two days before it was set to begin, shows that the Israeli delegation was scheduled to fly directly to the air base, circumventing Qatar's civilian points of entry that could have risked public exposure.

A damaged building in Doha, Qatar, following an Israeli airstrike targeting Hamas leaders on Sept. 9. (Ibraheem Abu Mustafa/Reuters)

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu apologized to Qatar on Sept. 29 for the strike, after prompting from the Trump administration, and pledged not to conduct such attacks in the future.

The documents show that the threat posed by Iran was the driving force behind the closer ties, which have been fostered by the U.S. military's Central Command, known as Centcom. One document describes Iran and its allied militias as the "Axis of Evil," and another includes a map with missiles superimposed over Gaza and Yemen, where Iranian allies hold power.

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Five Centcom PowerPoint presentations, obtained by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists and reviewed by The Washington Post, detail the creation of what the U.S. military describes as the "Regional Security Construct." In addition to Israel and Qatar, the construct includes Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The documents refer to Kuwait and Oman as "potential partners" that were briefed on all meetings.

The presentations are marked unclassified and were distributed to the construct's partners, and in some cases also to the "Five Eyes" intelligence alliance comprising Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Britain and the United States. They were written between 2022 and 2025, before and after the launch of Israel's war in Gaza in October 2023.

ICIJ and The Post verified the authenticity of the documents by cross-checking key details against official Defense Department records, archived military documents and other open sources. The dates and locations of publicly announced military exercises and meetings matched official U.S. military releases, and the names, ranks and positions of U.S. and foreign military officials aligned with public records.

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Centcom officials declined to comment for this article. Israel and the six Arab countries that are part of the construct did not respond to requests for comment.

One meeting in particular, in January at the Army's Fort Campbell in Kentucky, roughly an hour's drive from Nashville, included sessions where U.S. forces trained partners on how to detect and neutralize threats posed by subterranean tunnels — a key tool used by Hamas against the Israeli military in the Gaza Strip. Another document describes partners from six countries participating in a training to destroy underground tunnels but did not name the countries.

A masked Israeli soldier shows a tunnel located near the Jordanian Hospital in Gaza City's Sabra neighborhood during a foreign media embed with the Israel Defense Forces on Oct. 3. (Heidi Levine/For The Washington Post)

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Centcom personnel also led planning meetings to launch information operations to counter Iran's narrative that it is the regional protector of Palestinians and, according to a 2025 document, to "propagate [a] partner narrative of regional prosperity and cooperation."

Even as security cooperation with Israel expanded behind closed doors, Arab leaders denounced its war in Gaza. The leaders of Egypt, Jordan, Qatar and Saudi Arabia said the Israeli campaign amounted to a genocide. Qatar's leaders have issued some of the most scathing condemnations: At the U.N. General Assembly in September, the Qatari emir called the conflict "a genocidal war waged against the Palestinian people" and accused Israel of being "a state hostile to its environment, complicit in building an apartheid system." The Saudi Foreign Ministry condemned Israel in August for what it described as the "starvation" and "ethnic cleansing" of Palestinians.

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In a nod to political sensitivities, the documents state that the partnership "does not form a new alliance" and that all meetings would be "held in confidence."

Emile Hokayem, director of regional security at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, a think tank, said the United States has long hoped that military cooperation would bring about political normalization between Israel and the Arab states. However, while quietly working with the countries' military leaders may dodge thorny political discussions, this approach also "obscures or hides the reality" of

the tensions between the parties, he said.

Those tensions, Hokayem said, were on full display after the Israeli strike in Qatar. “A key member of the American effort has attacked another, with America seen as complacent, complicit or blind,” he said. “The resulting distrust will mar American efforts for years to come.”

A quiet partnership

U.S. military officials have publicly acknowledged the existence of the partnership but have not spoken about the extent of Israeli-Arab cooperation in those efforts. In 2022, Gen. Kenneth “Frank” McKenzie, then Centcom’s commander, described the partnership in congressional testimony as an effort “building on [the] momentum of the Abraham Accords,” the agreement establishing diplomatic ties between Israel and Morocco, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain.

Gen. Kenneth McKenzie, then the commander of the U.S. Central Command, testifies during a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing in 2021. (Jabin Botsford/The Washington Post)

The documents show how the centerpiece of the construct, an air-defense plan to combat Iran’s missiles and drones, moved from theory to reality over the past three years. Israel and the Arab countries signed on to the plan at a 2022 security conference, agreeing to coordinate military exercises and procure the equipment to make it possible. By 2024, Centcom successfully linked many of the partner states to its systems, according to the leaked documents, allowing them to provide radar and sensor data to the U.S. military and, in turn, to view the combined data of the partners.

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A briefing document stated that six of the seven partner nations were receiving a partial air picture of the region through Defense Department systems, and that two countries were sharing their own radar data through a U.S. Air Force squadron. Partner nations were also being onboarded to a U.S.-run secure chat system so that they could communicate with each other and the U.S. military.

The air-defense system, however, did nothing to protect Qatar against Israel’s Sept. 9 strike on its capital. U.S. satellite and radar systems did not provide an early warning of the strike, U.S. Air Force Lt. Gen. Derek France told reporters, because those systems “are typically focused on Iran and other [areas] where we expect an attack to come from.” Qatar said that its radar systems also failed to detect the missile launches by Israeli fighter jets.

While Qatar and Saudi Arabia do not have formal diplomatic relationships with Israel, the Centcom documents show the important behind-the-scenes role that both powerful gulf states played in this nascent partnership.

The May 2024 security conference at al-Udeid Air Base underscored the increased cooperation, with Israeli officials holding bilateral discussions with representatives from each of the attending Arab countries.

The conference also highlighted the diplomatic sensitivities inherent in

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these gatherings. A heading reading “MUST NOT DO” informed participants that they should not take photographs or provide access to the media. A bolded note above the itinerary reminded staff of culinary restrictions for Jewish and Muslim participants: “No pork / crustaceans.”

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Saudi Arabia played an active role in this collaboration, sharing intelligence with Israel and Arab partners on a broad range of security issues. In a 2025 meeting, a Saudi official and a U.S. intelligence official provided an “intelligence overview” to partners on political developments in Syria, including the role played by Russia, Turkey and Kurdish forces in the country. The briefing also covered the threats posed by the Iran-backed Houthi militant group in Yemen and the Islamic State’s operations in Syria and Iraq.

Centcom military planners are working to foster closer ties between Israel and Arab states in the years ahead.

Centcom officials at the Tanf garrison compound in Syria in June 2022. (Karoun Demirjian/The Washington Post)

A 2024 briefing document envisioned the creation of a “Combined Middle East Cyber Center” by the end of 2026 to serve as a headquarters for education and exercises on defensive cyber operations. Another document advocated for the creation of an “Information Fusion Center” for partners to “rapidly plan, execute, and assess operations in the information environment.”

A former U.S. defense official, speaking on the condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive military issues, said that these engagements reflected the Gulf Arab states’ pragmatic ties with Israel — and their respect for its military prowess. “They all seem to think the Israelis can do whatever they want, whenever they want, without detection,” the former official said.

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Israel and Hamas appeared to have only agreed to the initial phases of a peace deal, leaving unresolved broader questions about how Gaza is to be governed. Security analysts said gulf states could provide financial and diplomatic support for an international force in Gaza but would probably refrain from committing their own military forces to the complex and dangerous mission.

"There's a lot of concern in gulf states about what an unshackled Israel is going to do," said Thomas Juneau, a professor at the University of Ottawa whose work focuses on Middle East security issues. "But at the same time, they are reliant on the U.S. as the guarantor of their security … and they are also very concerned about Iran."

The Washington Post and the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists collaborated on this report. Dan Lamothe contributed to this report.

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